

Second Reaction: Processing “Bad News” to Foster Resilience and Kindness in Children

Reul, Sarah Lynne. *The Breaking News*. New York, Roaring Brook Press, 2018. Print.

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The tradition of storybooks fostering resilience and kindness in children is a rich practice that has grown with the resurgence of social-emotional learning (SEL) (Domitrovich et al. 408-16), Durlak et al. 405-32, Miller). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization that advocates for SEL, one of the goals is to assist children in developing a deeper awareness of emotional states and empathy for others. *The Breaking News* has the potential to foster SEL with young people, making this book a unique choice for school librarians, social workers, teachers, therapists, and parents.

The premise of this story, written and illustrated by Sarah Lynn Reul, is focused on a child grabbing with “bad news” impacting her family and surrounding community. The story opens with a television on in the background while a family of four is happily gathered around a kitchen table. Dad is smiling and drinking from a coffee mug while mom happily helps her two children care for a plant they have potted together. The author never gives the reader a sense of what the bad news is, but skillfully shows us what adults look like when dealing with troubling news delivered through electronic media sources. Capturing the parents’ fixation on various forms of news sources, the author shows how the child is on the edges trying to make

sense of the mood during difficult times. While the family rises above the news, the focus is on the child, who is the catalyst for aiding the family’s recovery by becoming a “helper” that wants to make a big difference.

A significant concern I would be remiss in not addressing is the slippery slope of inviting children to play the “helping role” during a time of crisis. This could set up a behavior pattern that could progress toward feeling responsible for the emotions of others (co-dependency) in unhealthy ways. It is unrealistic that a young child’s good deeds are going to change the mood of the community when bad news hits. Thus, the end of the book could have ended in a more realistic manner where adults help young people process a difficult situation while also supporting the young people in understanding the adult’s role in making the children feel safe despite adversity.

I had the pleasure of watching an experienced multiage teacher named Julie read this storybook. As I listened to the children process the story, I paid particular attention to Kye, a 4th grader, who was very engaged during the class discussion. When asked about the author’s purpose, Kye said, “This story is about little things and how even the little things can make things better.” Toward the end of the class discussion, Julie asked the class, “I have one final question: Can you relate to what this story is about?” Kye quickly responded again, “It makes me think of when the sirens came to my house.” Julie recognized Kye’s personal reference and said, “Yes, that situation was very personal to your life.” Kye nodded and repeated in agreement, “Yes, it was personal.” This was a critical moment for Kye where he was sharing a very stressful event that touched his family life when police officers arrested his father; Julie picked up quickly on his reference without it being a personal detail that the rest of the class had to understand.

Kye’s connection to the text reminds us as adults of the sensitive nature of this topic in the classroom and the need to ensure a safe space for children to process, no matter the nature of the situation.

Equally important in this scenario is the teacher’s personal response to the book. After Julie finished reading and processing the text with the class, the first thing she said to me was “This book is scary. It makes me think of when I was teaching in New York and 9/11 happened.” This book captures the historical time we live in and how a topic like this can bring up emotional connections for the adult reader as well. This teacher felt torn about using this book in the classroom because on the one hand, it does capture a topic relevant to our times, but on the other hand, it brings up uncomfortable feelings that we must be sensitive to as adults.

While this book is a children’s book, it also offers an essential message for adults to continually pay attention to and support children during stressful times. It is easy for adults to get consumed by a big event without thinking about how best to ease children into the situation in a developmentally-appropriate manner. I offer the possibility of discussing with children how adults could help children process bad news.

Some focus questions to consider when processing this story with children are:

- What did you see in this story? What are some details that stand out to you?
- Which details of the text are essential to the storyline?

- Why does the author start the story with the family potting a plant?
- What message does the author want to send to children? What message does the author want to send to adults?
- Why do you think the central character in the story (the young girl) was able to stay focused on “helping” despite the challenging situation surrounding her?
- If you were the main character in the story, how would you respond to this situation? Do you feel the adults should have protected the child more from the bad news? Why or why not?
- Can you relate to this story? How so?

Teachers or caregivers must consider ahead of time how they will respond to and support children as they engage in this text, keeping in mind the important goal of fostering resiliency during times of adversity. This story is touching and communicates the beautiful power of young people to care about their world and the people surrounding them. The author’s use of the plants and flowers as a hopeful symbol in the story was not lost on the children who were read this story by their teacher. As Helen Keller famously said, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” In her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck reminds us that adults need to continually help young people understand adversity in a way that fosters growth. Aspects of SEL can be incorporated throughout our curriculum to help us work with children by promoting resiliency and empathy in healthy ways.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Regina Weir formerly taught art and special education in public schools. She currently teaches pre-service teachers and conducts research related to special education and school equity at Indiana University Bloomington. Her research interests are focused on family, school, community partnerships, educational equity in schools for students with disabilities, and “at risk” student populations and social-emotional learning (SEL).